

Whooping Crane Over Illinois Beach State Park

by Robert Hughes

On 10–11 November 1998, an intense low pressure system passed through the upper Midwest, accompanied by gale force winds. The forecast for 11 November positioned the center of this storm just north of Lake Superior. Because air moves counterclockwise around a low pressure system, the wind that day would be from the west in the Chicago area, ideal conditions for a late fall hawk flight. The temptation was too great to resist, so I decided to spend the day at Illinois Beach State Park in Lake County, a premier location for observing the migration of fall raptors.

I arrived at 07:30 am and set up near the mouth of the Dead River, the traditional spot for hawk-watching at the park. Almost immediately I noticed hundreds of migrating waterfowl, which upon closer scrutiny proved to be mostly Mallards. Flocks were visible in every direction and as far as optical performance would permit. Within an hour or two, groups of Snow and Greater White-fronted Geese began to appear, the latter species exceptional along Lake Michigan at anytime. Clearly these birds were responding to the extreme weather by moving south en masse. Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) were also starting to appear. By late in the morning, I observed hundreds of cranes in the sky. Shortly before noon, die-hard hawkwatcher Bob Erickson arrived.



Whooping Crane photo taken by Robert Hughes on 11 November 1998 at Illinois Beach State Park, Lake County. The last time this species was recorded in Illinois was 40 years ago.

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At noon we considered leaving for a brief lunch break, for although seeing the cranes and waterfowl was fun, we weren't finding the hawks we had come to see. About 12:45 p.m., I noticed a large white bird coming in from the northwest, somewhat isolated from a group of nearby Sandhills. The split second between seeing the bird and raising my binoculars, I thought it would turn out to be an American White Pelican.

Through binoculars, however, it was obviously a Whooping Crane (*G. americana*), an adult no less, and I yelled this fact with such volume the bird itself probably heard me—not to mention Erickson! The crane flew almost directly overhead at no more than 45 meters, and at a slow enough pace to be photographed.

The black primaries, long legs and neck, and red crown were all visible. My initial excitement was tempered by the seeming impossibility of what just happened — Whooping Crane, a federally endangered species, should not occur anywhere near Illinois, so I rationalized the bird must have been an escapee or a waif from a re-introduction program. In retrospect, it became obvious that this was indeed a wild bird, a product of the intense storm and attendant high winds that battered the region. This crane had literally been blown off course from its normal migration route through the Dakotas and Nebraska.

Not surprisingly, other extralimital Whooping Cranes were reported from several states adjacent to Illinois on or around 11 November 1998. As far as I know, none of these birds was photographed.

Although a few old records of this species exist from Illinois, the only other recently confirmed 20th Century sighting is an adult seen and

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